

# Gulf Islands

Gulf Islands National Seashore  
Florida and Mississippi

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## Treasures Along the Gulf Coast

Gulf Islands National Seashore is a place of myriad riches—blue-green, sparkling waters, magnificent white beaches, and fertile coastal marshes. Its 12 areas include historic forts, shaded picnic areas, trails, and campgrounds. From Cat Island, Mississippi, it stretches eastward 160 miles to the Okaloosa Area east of Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

Congress established the national seashore in 1971, to protect the barrier islands, wildlife, salt marshes, historic structures, and archeological sites along the Gulf of Mexico, and to provide recreational opportunities. The long, narrow islands are composed

of white sand carried seaward by rivers draining from the Appalachian Mountains. During violent storms the islands function as barriers, blocking ocean waves that would otherwise strike the mainland with greater force.

Evidence of the American Indians who settled in the forests and marshes helps archeologists understand the native peoples' long history. After "discovery" by Europeans came a long struggle for the region's control. Eventually Florida and Mississippi became part of the United States. The US government developed the first federal tree farm at Naval Live Oaks Area in 1828 for the single

purpose of cultivating live oaks, used for shipbuilding. To help defend the mainland against foreign invasion, the government began fortifying Pensacola in 1829, and Ship Island, Mississippi, in 1859. From Ship Island's Fort Massachusetts the Union Army staged the capture of New Orleans in 1862. By the end of the Civil War new inventions like rifled cannon and ironclad warships called for new defenses. The US Army Coast Artillery Corps built underwater mines, searchlights, a complex system for tracking targets at sea, and huge guns in concrete batteries. These coastal defense systems became obsolete after World War II, and the military eventually abandoned the fortifications.

## How Barrier Islands Change

All theories about the barrier islands' formation involve waves, winds, and fluctuating sea levels. Longshore currents wear away the eastern end and build up the western ends of the islands, which move steadily westward. Shifting winds sculpt the dunes. Storms also alter islands' shapes when waves wash over the surfaces and rearrange sand. Such constant changes are slowed only by the protective covering of grasses and other plants on the dunes and island interiors. Sea oats, with their elaborate stem and root systems, play a vital role in holding these islands together.

NPS



Dunes of snow-white sand on Horn Island, Mississippi.



Fort Pickens, completed 1834, on Santa Rosa Island, Florida.



The waters of the sounds, bays, and bayous are less salty than the Gulf.



A great blue heron at sunset.



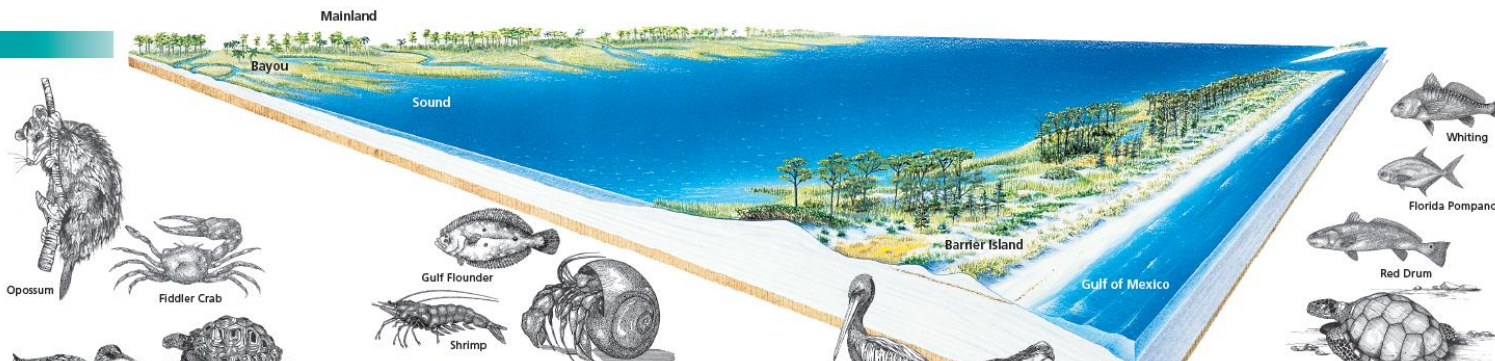
Saw palmetto grows under stands of pine and oak. American Indians found medicinal uses for its berries.

## Homes for Plants and Animals

Despite nature's unrelenting forces, life clings tenaciously to the barrier islands. Grasses and other plants slow the constant change process. Shrubs and some trees stand only a little higher than the dunes that protect them from salt spray.

Cordgrass can tolerate fluctuating sea levels. Submerged roots break down, helping to create "nursery grounds" where finfish and shellfish grow.

Interior marshes collect rainwater and support many plants and animals. Nutrients washed from the mainland enrich the waters of the bayous, sounds, and bays, which are less salty than the Gulf. Here shrimp and fish spend parts of their





# Exploring Gulf Islands



## VISITING THE MISSISSIPPI DISTRICT

On the mainland, William M. Colmer Visitor Center in Davis Bayou, near Ocean Springs, offers information, a bookstore, maps, exhibits, and films. Open daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. For programs and boating and fishing regulations, check the park website, [www.nps.gov/guis](http://www.nps.gov/guis), or call 228-230-4100.

Follow signs for Gulf Islands National Seashore along I-10 and US 90. Davis Bayou campground (open year-round, no reservations) has electricity, water hookups, a sewage dump station, group tent area, picnic pavilions, and a boat launch. Self-guiding hiking and bicycling trails are available.

The barrier islands, about 10 miles offshore, offer dramatic scenery, but facilities are limited. You can reach Cat, East Ship, Horn, Sand, and Petit Bois islands only by private boat. Use your own boat or hire a licensed operator from the list available at the visitor center in Davis Bayou and on our website.

To visit West Ship Island, take the passenger ferry from Gulfport, March through October, or dock your boat near Fort Massachusetts, during daylight hours only, year-round. Free exhibits and tours are available seasonally. Follow the boardwalk to the swim beach, pavilions, restrooms, showers, and snack bar. Fishing, boating, and dogs are prohibited in the swim beach area.

Primitive camping is allowed on East Ship, Horn, Sand, and Petit Bois islands. (Groups of 10 or more individuals are required to get a permit). Camping is allowed on Cat Island on National Park Service land. Camping is not allowed on West Ship Island or on privately owned land on Cat Island.

Bring all your food and drinking water. Practice "Leave No Trace" principles and remove all trash. For information visit [www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org).

State fishing regulations apply.

Boaters follow NOAA charts 11372, 11373, and 11374.

## VISITING THE FLORIDA DISTRICT

Visitor centers at historic Fort Barrancas, Fort Pickens, and Naval Live Oaks offer information, bookstores, and exhibits. Visitor centers open daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. All Florida areas are open daily and closed at sunset unless otherwise posted. For programs and guided tours, visit [www.nps.gov/guis](http://www.nps.gov/guis) or call 850-934-2656.

To reach the mainland forts and National Naval Aviation Museum, use the main gate entrance of Pensacola Naval Air Station. • For Perdido Key, take Barrancas Avenue (FL 292) from Pensacola. • For Fort Pickens, Naval Live Oaks, and Santa Rosa, take US 98 east to Pensacola Bay Bridge. • Fort Pickens Road is subject to flooding; for forecast,

call 850-934-2656. • For Okaloosa take US 98 east past Fort Walton Beach.

Camping reservations highly recommended. Visit [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov) or call 877-444-6777 for reservations. Naval Live Oaks Youth Group Camping Pavilion (see map below) is for organized groups.

Swim beaches are at Rosamond Johnson Beach on Perdido Key, Langdon Beach at Fort Pickens, Opal Beach at Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa. Do not swim in shipping channels.

Fishing is allowed from Fort Pickens fishing pier without a license. Otherwise, state fishing licensing and regulations apply.

Boaters follow NOAA charts 11378, 11383, and 11384.

Hike self-guiding trails at Fort Barrancas, Fort Pickens, Perdido Key, and Naval Live Oaks.

Dunes may be closed to restore vegetation.

Entrance fees apply at Fort Pickens, Perdido Key, and Opal Beach, or show valid National Parks or Federal Recreational Lands pass. Night-owl permits are available at entrance stations (additional fee); required for after-hours entrance to Fort Pickens and Perdido Key.

©GPO 2006-2007/NOAA. Last updated 2006. Printed on recycled paper.



## FOR A SAFE VISIT

Never swim alone. Beware of sharks, jellyfish, rip currents, stingrays, Portuguese man-of-war, and barnacle-covered rocks. • Watch for sudden storms. Do not stand on piers, beaches, or fortifications during thunderstorms. • Use caution if exploring forts and batteries. Carry a flashlight for dark passages. • For your safety, some fortifications are closed. • Sunlight is intense. Wear protective clothing, drink plenty of fluids, and always use

## ISLAND WILDERNESS AREAS

In 1978 Congress designated Horn and Petit Bois islands—among the few undeveloped barrier islands on the Gulf coast—as wilderness areas. Uncommon species of birds, animals, and marine life are protect-

structures, and in buildings. • Do not feed or disturb wildlife. • Spearfishing is not allowed anywhere in the park. • Federal law protects all wildlife, plants, and historic objects.

For firearms regulations check the park website.

Emergencies call 911

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Call or check our website.

shelter, facilities, or communication. Park rangers can help you plan. For information visit [www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net) or [www.nps.gov/guis](http://www.nps.gov/guis).

Practice "Leave No

## Fort Barrancas, Fort Pickens, Advanced Redoubt, and Naval Live Oaks (Florida)

